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of electronic knowledge
repository

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Keywords : Knowledge management, work disqualification, knowledge fragmentation, paradox, human resource management.

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The paradox of knowledge management: work disqualification and knowledge impoverishment through the use of electronic knowledge sharing repository

Laurent Taskin and Gabriel Van Bunnan¹

Abstract

This contribution illustrates how the technological mediation of knowledge transfer, here through the use of electronic knowledge sharing repository, leads to a disqualification of work through impoverishing organizational knowledge. We underline this impoverishment process constitutes a major paradox in a context where knowledge management is associated with an enrichment perspective, contributing to the development of a specific competitive advantage for firms, in the mainstream literature. Studying this paradox in a Belgian federal agency from a critical perspective, we report some micro-emancipating strategies developed by workers to preserve the richness and the coherence of their work and knowledge.

Key words

Knowledge management, work disqualification, knowledge fragmentation, paradox, human resource management.

Introduction

For more than twenty years, the mainstream literature on knowledge management has introduced knowledge as the core source of competitive advantage (Grant, 1996 ; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It has been argued that politics favoring knowledge transfer and creation contribute to the development of individual and collective learning and to the creation of new collective and organizational knowledge (Andrews and Delahaye, 2000; Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Von Krogh, 1998). Inspired by this perspective, many organizations have invested in a series of methods to develop this practice. Among these, the use of databases like electronic knowledge sharing repositories (now EKSr) has been particularly influential is said to be and beneficial in terms of knowledge capture, creation and transfer (see e.g. Hickins, 1999 ; Voelpel, Dous and Davenport, 2005).

Critical analysis of the field of knowledge management has focused on discussions of the concept of knowledge management (see e.g. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001) with limited attention to process of knowledge transfer, namely through the use of EKSr. Yet, the implementation of this type of device raises new issues, including the ‘resistance’ to the introduction of such tools.

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This directly refers to the process of disqualification of work which was identified by Milton Friedmann (1956) in the late fifties, and in the context of mechanization of work. He observed that the introduction of technological devices in the conduct of work, far from allowing workers to focus on richer tasks, led to a stronger task fragmentation. In his words, the “machine” intercalates more between the worker and his/her output. Other sociologists, taking Friedmann’s analysis further in a more general critique on capitalism, argued that task specialization leads to knowledge fragmentation (Braverman, 1976; Freyssenet, 1977). The argumentation is that jobs gained in standardization and became poorer in terms of knowledge creation.

In order to examine this issue to the current reality of knowledge management development via EKSRS, we conducted an exploratory case study research in the human resource department of a Belgian public agency, recalled Healthcase. As argued elsewhere, technology may promote a valorization of control (see e.g. Coombs, Knights and Willmott, 1992) and this has been observed at Healthcase, where the use of the EKSRS is associated with controlling knowledge and, moreover, as a way, for the company, to re-appropriate this knowledge. Far from an enrichment perspective developed in the literature, workers view the technological mediation of knowledge as an element in a disqualification process leading to the dispossession of their individual know-how. Focusing on the actors’ representations of the use of this technology, our study illustrates the employees’ reluctance to participate to this knowledge transfer repository. We interpret their resistance as micro-emancipating strategies (see Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) against perceived work disqualification and knowledge fragmentation.

We first examine knowledge transfer –and, especially, codification strategies through the use of EKSRS– as a core issue in the management literature, pointing to critical interpretations of knowledge management. Second, we introduce Healthcase and present our main observations. Our specific focus is upon the dynamic process of micro-emancipating strategies observed in reaction to the EKSRS tool. Third, we show how its application has impoverished organizational knowledge and degraded work.

Knowledge transfer: from a technical to a relational process

Mainstream approach and definitions

During the last couple of decades, knowledge management has emerged as a key-component of organization’s management especially in areas confronted by demographical tensions and seeking to develop competitive economies by promoting a “knowledge society”. This is especially the case in Belgium where, by 2018, more than 30% of the workforce will be over 60 years old while only a small proportion of young people will enter the employment market with the required qualifications for undertaking “knowledge work” (Bureau Fédéral du Plan, 2001). Inspired by the knowledge-based-view developed in strategic management (Conner and Prahalad, 1996; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander,

1992; Spender, 1996; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Von Krogh, 1998), management scholars and professionals have argued how the creation and transfer knowledge was a critical issue; what thus has been translated into human resource policies (e.g. attraction and retention of the so-called talents, e.g.).

Distinguishing tacit from explicit knowledge, where the former refers to (inter)-personal and experience and the latter to more codified forms of knowledge, the mainstream approach has identified two core processes of knowledge creation: socialization and externalization (Hansen, Nohria and Tierney, 1999; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The logics of these two (complementary) processes are opposed. When socializing, the actor enters in an interpersonal dynamic but knowledge remains the property of individuals. People have to know each other in order to share their (tacit) knowledge. When externalizing, the process is less interpersonal. The intention is to codify and distribute knowledge property by making it explicit and thus accessible to a group or an organization.

EKSR consists of an electronic store of content which enable the reuse, distribution and transfer of knowledge in selected areas (see e.g. Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei, 2005; Alavi and Leidner, 2001). It is also seen to facilitate collective learning and to accelerate decision making (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). EKSR may take different forms, from a basic platform for searching documents to an intranet, including databases, computer mediated discussion forums, groupwares or a workflow systems (see for e.g. Hall, 2001; Sambarmurthy and Subramani, 2005; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Watson and Hewett, 2006).

In order to meet these expectations, management scholars identified variables aiming at predicating (a) the adoption of EKSR and, (b) the effective knowledge transfer through such HR devices. On the first dimension, several studies show that users' computer comfort (Jarvenpaa and Staples, 2000), perceived usefulness (King and Marks, 2008), a user friendly system (Kim and Lee, 2006) and monetary rewards (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002; Kulkarni, Ravindran and Freeze, 2006)² have a strong impact on the effective use of EKSR. Focusing on contingent variables, Bock, Zmud, Kim and Lee (2005) point to the role of a favorable organizational climate which supports fairness, innovativeness and affiliation in the adoption of such tools. On a second dimension, it has been demonstrated that knowledge sharing behaviour through EKSR is positively influenced when employees experience autonomy in their job, and when they perceive colleagues and supervisors are supportive (Cabrera, Collins and Salgado, 2006). Research also illustrates the role of other variables such as the willingness to improve one's professional reputation (Wakso and Faraj, 2005), the enjoyment of helping others (Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei, 2005), self-efficacy (Lin, 2007; Watson and Hewett, 2006) and the perceived benefits (Bordia, Irmer and Abusah, 2006; Hew and Hara, 2007) of knowledge sharing behaviour through EKSR.

² Note that other scholars pointed to contradictory results about this relationship (see for ex. Bock and Kim, 2002; Kwok and Gao, 2005; Lin, 2007).

Nevertheless, *“a large number of KM initiatives fail due to the reluctance of employees to share knowledge through these systems”* (Kankanhalli et al., 2005: 113) (see also McDermott, 1999 or Kolekofski and Heminger, 2003). Such observations stimulate some skepticism with regard to the claims of mainstream advocates and studies of knowledge management and especially the introduction of interpersonal data repositories. As argued elsewhere, *“knowledge contribution in electronic networks of practices is a socially complex process that involves a variety of actors with different needs and goals”* (Wasko and Faraj, 2005:53). This calls for in-depth analysis focusing on actors’ representations and a more critical analysis.

Critical approach: Towards organizational knowledge and job disqualification

Critical studies of knowledge management has examined its models (McAdam and McReedy, 2001), the concept itself (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, Kärreman and Swan, 2002) and the way HR policies are deployed (Newell, Swan, Robertson and Scarbrough, 2009), EKSR and knowledge codification have been interpreted as a method or a solution for more or less actively guiding further work through *“enforcing rules and prescriptions for working”* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001). This is particularly the case when EKSR operates as rationalization tool where it contributes to a Taylorian split between design and implementation.

Notably, the lack of contextualization of such device has been pointed out (Swan and Scarbrough, 2001), while Gray (2001) has argued that EKSR contributes to reinforcing control, and decreases the power of employees. Beside the traditional critical issue of power and control, we ask: how do managerial devices promoting knowledge sharing -such as EKSR- affect organizational knowledge and the enrichment of jobs ? By inspiring of critical research developed in the industrial context of ‘Trente Glorieuses’ (see Braverman, 1976; Freyssenet, 1977; Friedman, 1956) and considering the development of knowledge management devices aiming at ‘extracting’ individual knowledge to a collective level, shifting by the way the holder of this knowledge (from the individual to the organization), one may question if such managerial device may not contribute to the standardization of knowledge (we apply what has been introduced in the repository), through impoverishing organizational knowledge (through this standardization process) and disqualifying work (time dedicated to knowledge creation is decreased since this knowledge is partly available in such depositories) over time.

Methodology

In order to study the interindividual dynamics involved in the introduction of an EKSR, we conducted an exploratory qualitative case study in the HR department of a Belgian federal agency, recalled Healthcase. This research strategy allows us to understand relational processes, organizational (dys)functions and decision processes (Yin, 2009; Miller and Friesen, 1982).

Data were collected between April and September 2010, through the combination of documentary analysis (Intranet, flowchart and webpages about the organization), direct observation and seven semi-structured interviews with the main stakeholders of this EKSIR implementation: the HR Director, the project leader, one manager, three employees-beneficiaries of the system and one expert in charge of contributing to the enrichment of the EKSIR, i.e. a process-owner workers. Interviews ranged from 58 to 80 minutes in duration, with an average of 71 minutes, were recorded and fully transcribed and analyzed following a structural analysis and in an emerging way, i.e. simultaneously to the reading of empirical data and on the basis of theoretical referents used (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Interviews were conducted in French, translations are ours.

Results

Background

For more than ten years, the Belgian public sector has been involved in a major restructuring process: the Copernic plan (Thunus, 2004). Its main goal is to increase the service offered to the citizens by developing a customer- and results-based approach. Healthcase is a Belgian federal agency counting 2,000 employees. Its HR department is made up of 50 employees with variable instruction levels, from high school certificate to master degree, and ensure the traditional human resource management activities.

The horizontal and vertical division of labour is high. Indeed, the HR department is composed of 5 units which are relatively interlinked and interdependent and which are dedicated to one specific human resource process (recruitment, selection and mobility; working conditions and payroll administration; personal development; organizational development; knowledge management). In regard to units and their activities, workers are generally very specialized and they are even called ‘advisors’ due to their expertise and the content of these tasks may be qualified as a routine. Work is therefore characterized by standardization (but we also observed mutual adjustment coordination strategies) and relies on both formal and relational controls. The hierarchical supervisor personally ensures that workers are sitting in the office and putting in the hours, before worrying about what they really do and how they do it. Drawing on Mintzberg (1982), we may characterize Healthcase’s HR Department as a mechanistic bureaucracy.

The SRIPEL project

In early 2007, a new HR Director has been hired at Healthcase. In the logic of the Copernic plan, the department was audited by internal clients as “not sufficiently efficient”. Services provided were not satisfactory, information was dispersed and executions of procedures were low and not always homogeneous, notably due to the linguistic belongingness of employees. In order to improve the situation, the HR Director took a set of strategic decisions to position his department as ‘strategic

partner' within the agency and identified 80 processes to be reengineered. With the project leader he hired for supervising these processes, they decided to introduce within the department an EKSR called "SRIPEL". The objective of this latter was to optimize procedures by leading them more efficiently and to provide a better service; more precisely, the goals associated to this EKSR were: (i) to foster knowledge transfer in order to face the near baby-boomers' retirement represented by a large numbers of employees (often recognized as experts in their job); (ii) to compensate the turnover of employee because the average length of work in a same position was three years and (iii) to train new workers more quickly and cheaply. Developed by a consultancy firm, SRIPEL centralizes all the HR procedures allowing each employee to work on each process which were dictated in advance. The EKSR gives indeed the direction to follow by decomposing the process into a series of discrete tasks.

We must evolve towards more efficiency, more professionalism and towards more client focus and SRIPEL serves that (...). Here, we talk about knowledge management. This project consists to capture knowledge, systematize the knowledge (...) The first step is to describe all processes (...). My test for me, when I imagine that I'm new, is to see if I can learn from what is written, is it going to help me training myself? [HR Director]

The setting online of SRIPEL started in June 2008. During this period, employees were invited to invest time in order to decompose, to review and to study each new process in order to integrate them. At the end of November 2009, SRIPEL became finally operational.

Capturing knowledge within the system

Progressively, units' leaders were invited to work with the project leader in order to write the process that they mastered and were designated as process-owners of their respective unit. This project was not considered as priority and the director finally urged managers to take part.

In some departments, there were older people who did not want to hear about SRIPEL. That is very clear ! I also remember a former colleague. She didn't accept this project very well because in her opinion it was a waste of time. If she spent time writing those processes, she would lose time which was usually devoted to her work. And if she didn't do her work, there would be nobody else who would do it. So, she looked at this project with a negative view without seeing the added value it could have brought. [A worker]

We observed that units' leaders do not transmit directly the names of experts or that senior workers refused to commit themselves in the process by justifying their lack of time and their high level of workload. This may be interpreted as a micro-emancipation strategy, which emphasizes "*on concrete activities, forms, and techniques that offer themselves not only as means of control, but also as objects and facilitators of resistance and thus, as vehicle for liberation.*" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 446), This first micro-emancipation strategy illustrates the fact that the actors do not represent the usefulness of the tool, since they have not been associated to its implementation.

In the beginning, people did not write. They did not tell me. So I did some research but nobody knew or wanted to help me. Over time, I was fed up. And one day, I told the Director. Then, with time, people accepted to describe their process. [Project leader]

The project leader then met each process owner. Sometimes, other individuals were in charge of representing reluctant experts with whom they worked. The aim was to speak about the process in which the senior worker was an expert. However, these “substitute” process owners were not always comfortable with the content of knowledge to be transmitted. First, because they did not always feel enough experienced to perform in this role; second, because management imposed them to become process owner.

One of the most disadvantage, but we cannot do otherwise, is that these processes were done by people who were considered as experts but who were not often experts in their process. For example, they asked me to do retirement process because I did my thesis on that topic but I did not consider me necessarily as expert. [...] They thus considered themselves as expert in the field but were not necessarily...[A process owner]

The technique used consisted in applying the RACI method, i.e. asking who is responsible, in charge of the action, must be consulted and who must be informed. With this latter, no critical knowledge was forgotten but several meetings were nevertheless necessary. Indeed, processes were sometimes very complex and systematically required the validation of the hierarchical line. Obviously, actors appear still reluctant to take part to the project as the following examples showing it:

During reengineering, I sometimes encountered some difficulties like: “Who are you to tell me that, it has been 20 years since I started working in this business !” [...] And then, on another process, the situation was blocked after two or three meetings. We went through the whole procedure. Then, the expert decided to rewrite all the content, saying: “You do not understand, I’m going to start from scratch”. This was unacceptable. I did not work on this process for a year but I worked on other ones. I avoided confrontation. After a year I managed to show him that I was right. “I apologize” he said, “I was selfish ...”. We started over and after that, it was ok. [Project leader]

For example, when I was hired at Healthcase, I was asked to work on the process of ministerial staff because I very often used to work with an expert on this matter. She had been in charge of this process since the beginning of her career and she knew all about this subject. But at the beginning of our meetings, she was reluctant to share her knowledge with me as she told me: “*do not worry, I deal with it and I do that very well.*” [A process owner]

Here, expertise is then used for managing personal legitimacy and non-participation to the EKSR. Micro-emancipation strategies were justified through the experience and through the falsification of knowledge made by a process owner. As his older colleague, we can suppose that this behaviour is a way for the actor to conserve his area of autonomy and his legitimacy (of advisor).

Facing this resistance, the project leader decided to adopt a reassuring attitude throughout following meetings. After some months, a large number of processes were validated by the hierarchical line and the next step of the project began.

At the beginning, I saw that people did not say anything. I noticed that my questions were provocative. People were afraid to say what they did and that I would point out the possible mistakes. I had to reassure them and often say: “together, we are going to facilitate your job in order to make more time for you”. Slowly, people learned and were reassured. [Project leader]

At this first stage of implementation, we may argue SIRPEL lacks of legitimacy: imposed to employees through a recent management and external experts hired for this purpose, without a clear view on its usefulness, employees of the HR department appear reluctant to its use, depicting the tool and their participation to the knowledge capture as a “waste of time” or “nonsense” activity. The micro-emancipating strategies illustrate the fear to see their specific and unique individual expertise substituted by SIRPEL, what directly refers to the fear of losing a source (the uniqueness of the expertise) of their own power in the organization (see Crozier and Friedberg, 1977).

Using the system and transferring knowledge

In order to use SRIPEL and to effectively transfer knowledge through this tool, training sessions were organized, for all the workers of the HR Department of Healthcase. Planned on a half day, the objective was to introduce the tool, the procedure and to experiment concretely knowledge transfer through a case study.

During these training sessions, a large number of workers decided to sit at the back of the computer room in order to avoid being solicited by the process owner. Others reduced their interaction to a minimum and some of them saw in this situation an opportunity to go back to home earlier or to work on their own tasks. Finally, trainers faced a high absenteeism level and a more general lack of interest from participants. Yet, their presence had been strongly recommended by the hierarchy. This may also be interpreted as micro-emancipating strategies aiming at contesting the EKSR and the ‘stealing’ of the workers’ expertise.

During sessions, there are times when people leave early or surf on the Internet...hm...not on the Internet, they read their private e-mails...not private, professional ! Sometimes, there are times when it's so boring that we need to wake up and some people work on their tasks to meet the customers' requirements within 48 hours because management have already demanded half a day to attend this session so they try to save time somewhere. They say they can do two things at once and they do ! [A worker]

Despite this hierarchical requirement, we observed here a sort of implicit agreement between workers and process owners. Thanks to the knowledge that they have about the rules of the organization (sessions not mandatory, no attendance sheet) these actors developed common rules to achieve respectively their objectives (on one hand, the process owner is there because he is obligated to give his sessions and on the other hand, all agents are strongly invited to assist to these but do others things). This was particularly evident when an agent told us he had never attended one of these sessions by justifying his absence by selection missions.

No, it is during working hours at dates well-defined where we are invited to participate. They show slides about SRIPEL and the person who made them explains the process. But the problem is also that since the beginning of the year, I have been invited ten times but I have never been to any of these ten times because I have selections or others things to do, so I was unable to attend because there is only one date which is given and so they told me: “Read the document and if you have any questions, you

can ask me.” But you don’t read the document because you don’t have time, and because these are procedures that you don’t use now... [A worker]

In order to optimize the use of SRIPEL, the Director and the project leader decided to hire two knowledge managers; their role was broad, covering, e.g., the organization of training sessions within organization and quality control.

But now, more than SRIPEL, we have coordinators in different areas who are there to control the quality of our files and facilitate knowledge transfer through that tool. So, for example, the Direction placed two knowledge managers in order to facilitate knowledge transfer into cells through the tool SRIPEL. They are in charge of organizing training sessions. And they also have a quality control on files that we provide to them. [A worker]

From the workers’ point of view, this hiring contributed to increase direct hierarchical control. Exclusively controlled by coordinators, agents were required by their managers to send them mistakes they noticed or the updates to make by writing an electronic comment. They decided to send either a surplus of comments or no comments at all via the dialog box reattached to SRIPEL.

About current reluctances, it is not really a reluctance but I notice that some agents inundate us with comments. It’s hell! For a yes or a no and it’s like they do it on purpose to see if it is really up to date what they see as faults. It seems that they challenge us, me and my two colleagues (the two coordinators). [Project leader]

Thanks to these attitudes, agents can either benefit from the extra work of their coordinators in order to avoid too much control on their dossiers or on the contrary, take the advantage of the knowledge retention they have in order to oppose themselves to their own control. Honestly, this strategy deserves to be highlighted: this latter shows indeed how management can produce an impoverishment situation of the organizational knowledge from those wished for at the origin (i.e. a reinforcement of the organizational knowledge). Actually, by refusing that the main actors have their own control, workers send a strong signal to the Direction. Through this micro-emancipation strategy, employees express their refusal to participate in such system.

And the problem is that we lose our distinctiveness, we are disqualified and have to process files without particularity. We are no longer considered as advisors, our HR expertise is no longer recognized, we are just there to execute. [A worker]

This is particularly the case through the lack of rules around the comments. However, the more SRIPEL is used, the more the actors achieve to find autonomy areas. The use of SRIPEL reveals other micro-emancipating strategies directed through the need to emancipate from the control exerted through management and the tools implemented.

Discussion

Healthcase has illustrated one paradox associated to knowledge management: through the development of an HR management tool (here, an EKSAR) aiming at constituting a knowledge repository and creating organizational knowledge, individual knowledge becomes fragmented and the

richness of the collective knowledge collected in such database appears lower; the (quantitative) raise in organizational knowledge is here simultaneous to the loss in knowledge diversity (quality). In other words, far from creating the context of a dynamic collaboration, this HR policy leads to fragment work and impoverish knowledge at two levels: collective (the knowledge introduced in the database is poor, even falsified) and individual (through the fragmentation observed and the time lost in reporting activities and expertise).

It is this deleterious effect that actors observed and that led them to adopt micro-emancipating strategies in order to prevent (a) a potential loss of their power, associated to their expertise at an individual level and, (b) a potential loss of autonomy, associated to the development of technocratic controls (through the database recording their knowledge and work procedures) and socio-ideological controls (through training, the hiring of project coordinators and leaders, the use of the database, for instance). This system is seen as having the potential to rearrange work procedures and setting new rules of coordination (Ungan, 2006). In line with Segrestin' (2004) work, this EKSR appears used as a constraining managerial strategy in order to ensure 'a certain kind of' work coordination. In reaction to these threats, actors adopted the micro-emancipation strategies which were reported earlier.

As observed above, Healthcare employees seek to liberate from the impoverishment of their knowledge and the fragmentation of their work. The fragmentation and disqualification processes we observe here have both similarities and dissimilarities with Friedmann (1956)'s analysis. Similarities, first, because EKSR acts here as the 'machine' that intercalates more between the worker and his/her output and led to fragment knowledge: the activity of 'reporting' their knowledge is perceived as a mechanistic and administrative operation, which does not fit with expert's work. Another common trait with Friedmann's contribution in the analysis performed here lies in the disqualification of work we observed: instead of creating (original and creative) collective knowledge sustaining individual knowledge creation, this tool seems to isolate individuals. Dissimilarities, then, because the division of labour pointed by Friedmann is from another nature here: if there is a distinction between the users and the designers of the EKSR, this does not directly lead to a specialization in the content of the knowledge mobilized by the experts.

The scope of this contribution is not to denounce the deleterious effect of a specific HR policy, but well to illustrate that these policies are always the result of a social process "involving choice and often negotiation between management and labour" (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005: 25). One may not impose to employees to transfer their knowledge and build, consequently, a collective knowledge capital. In order to illustrate what Edwards and Wajcman call "negotiation", we mobilized the notion of micro-emancipation developed by Alvesson and Willmott (1992) in a critical management perspective. As reported by Burawoy (1979) in *Manufacturing Consent*, and through a rigorous ethnographical investigation, negotiation among workers is inevitable when the rules of the game are

externally imposed and, more, this involvement in ‘making out’ contributes to shape a collective identity and a subjective sense of autonomy.

Our research is part of such critical work, and also calls for ethnographic enquiry. This remains an exploratory study. Anyway, our research calls for more interpretive studies, focusing on actors’ interpretations, what remains marginal in the field of knowledge management (to the notable exceptions of Kjaergaard and Kautz, 2008; Sorensen and Lundh-Snis, 2001 and Vaast, 2007).

The main limit of this research lies in its exploratory character and the limited number of interviews that were performed, as well as the exclusive consideration of the EKS strategy. Future work would focus and develop the ‘new’ fragmentation and disqualification processes we observed here.

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